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Pointing the Hossu

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This paper takes as point of departure three texts assigned as readings for an April 2009 research seminar on dialogic communication, held at Roskilde University, Denmark (Black, 2008; Reason, 2002; Stewart, Zediker & Black, 2004). Two of the texts make references to Oriental philosophy, one explicitly, and the other implicitly. Neither of them, however, pursue the idea in earnest, that the Oriental perspective may supplement or indeed challenge conventional Western understandings of dialogue and participation. This paper briefly outlines the philosophical background drawn upon in the two articles and then elaborates a bit on alternative notions of dialogue by means of participation.

In his inaugural professorial lecture, Peter Reason describes how struggling with a Zen paradox, or *koan* (a “case”; Chinese: *gongan*) furthers his understanding of the importance of “bringing our moment to moment inquiring attention into more and more of our lives as we live them”, or, in the action research tradition, “living life as inquiry” (Reason 2002). Thus, Reason ends up interpreting the Zen story from a rational Western perspective.

Stewart, Zediker & Black (2004) discuss the ideas of a wide range of philosophers and scientists, one of them being David Bohm whose holistic approach to science and to communication by means of common consciousness had clear affinities to East Asian thinking. This fascination with eastern philosophy was shared by several other prominent scientists of the 20th century, notably physicists like Robert Oppenheimer and Niels Bohr. Bohm’s questioning of the conventions of science was also voiced for example by Barbara McClintock (Keller, 2003) whose intuitive approach, “the feeling for the organism”, incidentally fits in wonderfully with a Zen approach.

Before proceeding any further, let us first explore the background for the apparent paradox in Reason’s *koan*: that a Zen master, silently wielding his *hossu* (fly whisk; a stag’s tail, symbolic of leading; just as the stag leads the deer) would put the singing of a bird on the same footing as exposition on the scriptures.

A note on Chan and Daoism

Chan (Sanskrit: *Dhyāna*; Japanese: *Zen*) means meditation, and it is one of the “three essentials” in the study of Buddhism. In China, it became the name of a religious school that developed in the 6th century as a reaction to the elaborate, colourful and highly sophisticated metaphysics of Indian Buddhism (Ch’en, 1964). Developed within the Mahayana tradition, Chan maintains that the aggregates (*Skandha*) defining physical and mental existence are empty (*Śūnya*; i.e. they are impermanent and dependent), and that only Buddha-nature (*Tathāgata-garbha*) is real and omnipresent. Buddha-nature is a

potential. You cannot see it, touch it, or explain it. Thus there are obvious similarities to the Daoist *Dao*:

“The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things”.
(Laozi, 1891, ch. 1)

In a Chan context, the Lankāvatāra Sūtra teaches that the only reality is consciousness (Mind Only), and that all experiences of the world surrounding us are merely products of the mind (Suzuki, 1932).

Buddha-nature, and Dao for that matter, cannot be understood by means of study and reflection. They must be grasped intuitively; and meditation is a practical means of preparing for that experience, which is known as enlightenment (Chinese: Wu; Japanese Satori) and described as “an awareness of the undifferentiated unity of all existence” (Ch’en 1964, p. 358). In Chan, there are various practices of meditation, the most radical of which, developed by the Linji sect, involves meditation on paradoxes (gongan) as well physical abuse in order to provoke sudden enlightenment. The philosophical underpinnings for such methods were derived from the Lankāvatāra Sūtra that maintains that truth (i.e. what is real) can and should be expressed without words:

“The truth-treasure whose principle is the self-nature of Mind, has no selfhood (nairatmyam), stands above all reasoning, and is free from impurities; it points to the knowledge attained in one’s inmost self;” (Suzuki 1932, ch. 1, v. 1)



Figure 1. Liang Kai (early 13th century): *The Sixth Patriarch Chopping Bamboo*. Ink on paper, 72.7 x 31.8 cm, Tokyo National Museum.

Figure 2. Early Japanese copy after Liang Kai: *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing up a Sūtra*. Ink on paper, 73 x 31.7 cm. Collection of Mitsui Takanaru, Tokyo.

Hence the apparent anti-intellectualism and distrust of words evidenced in Reason's story of a Zen master replacing a sermon with the singing of a bird, or the images of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, desecrating the scriptures and performing menial tasks (Figures 1 and 2). Again in this respect, Chan echoes sentiments expressed in philosophical Daoism:

"Sincere words are not fine; fine words are not sincere. Those who are skilled (in the Tao) do not dispute (about it); the disputatious are not skilled in it. Those who know (the Tao) are not extensively learned; the extensively learned do not know it". (Laozi 1891, ch. 81)

Dialogue and participation

What the Zen story seems to suggest is that there are alternatives to our accustomed forms of dialogue when it comes to communicating knowledge. Of course there is no guarantee that your Wu and my Satori are in any way identical. But the same problem pertains to the co-construction of meaning by means of spoken or written dialogue. What is interesting is the method of communicating insight by means of actions.

Bohm's "undivided whole" may be written off as mysticism, just as McClintock's intuitive approach may be interpreted as eccentricity. But such labels solve no problems. Perhaps, in communicating knowledge based on insights of an intuitive or spiritual nature, pointing the way and leaving interpretation to the audience, as did the master with his hossu, more genuinely allows for an understanding than do "fine words that are not sincere". It is not a path that is easily travelled, however, so let us turn instead to more mundane notions of communicating by example and by participation.

On a practical level, apprenticeship is an ancient and proven way of teaching skills and constructing experiential knowledge by means of example just as much as by words. In their work on situated learning and communities of practice, Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) have expanded on apprenticeship so that it has come to include informal learning in white collar work. Wenger's concept of communities of practice, i.e. learning as a social activity, has been experimented with in also formal learning, notably in computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL, Dirckinck-Holmfeld & Sorensen, 1999). Particularly in Scandinavia, this approach to CSCL has become quite important. In CSCL, acculturation most often starts with legitimate peripheral participation, and it evolves as participants jointly adopt and negotiate the social norms and conventions that apply in the unfamiliar virtual setting, where the individual, represented by a *tag*, is defined solely by his or her active contributions to the community.

With the advent of Web 2.0 and social internetworking, the community concept has become central to exploring the potentials of the new medium; and collective action of a kind not unlike Bohm's "stream of meaning flowing between the participants in dialogue" has become a focal point. Thus, in his seminal article on Web 2.0, O'Reilly (2005) writes about "harnessing the collective intelligence", and about an "architecture of participation". In the same vein, Howe (2006) has developed the concept of Crowdsourcing, i.e. distributed problem-solving, being an extreme form of user-driven innovation. Collective intelligence, a concept most clearly associated with net media in

the writings of Lévy (1997), may be facilitated on an unprecedented scale through the use of digital communication technology.

In the docuverse of the internet, the roles of expert and audience are fluid. Roles shift and meaning(s) are continually negotiated as information is created, exchanged and combined in complex and shifting patterns of collaboration. In this self-organizing, collaborative internetworking, just as in CSCL, each individual is defined by the extent and nature of his or her participation. Communicating equals *being* on the net, and, to draw a final analogy to Chan, and to Bohm, it may be claimed that the essence of *being* in the virtual universe of the internet is *consciousness*.

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